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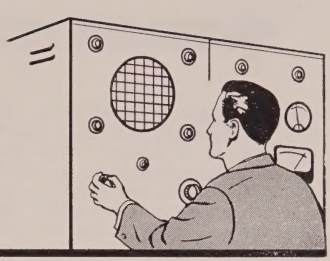

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VOL. 29, NOS. 1 - 2 JANUARY - FEBRUARY, 1959 Subscription By Application Only

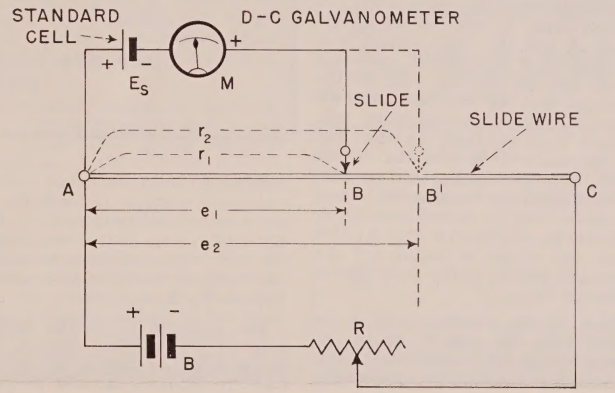

# An Experimenter's Potentiometer

*By the Engineering Department, Aerovox Corporation*

THE **potentiometric method** provides accurate measurements of voltage in the laboratory. This method is employed extensively in the calibration of voltmeters and also particularly in the measurement of small d-c voltages. It has the superiority of all bridge-type measurements; i. e., the comparison of an unknown to a standard quantity.

Although the advantages of potentiometer-type voltage measurements are readily conceded by the experimenter, this method has not been generally available to him. The reason for this has been the costliness of potentiometer instruments.

This article describes an accurate, lower-priced potentiometer which may be assembled by the experimenter. This instrument will provide the precision which formerly has not been obtainable in low-budget laboratories and instrument shops.




PRINCIPLE OF POTENTIOMETER

FIG. 1

### Basic Principle of Potentiometer

By means of the potentiometer circuit, the value of an unknown d-c voltage is determined by reference to an accurately-known standard d-c voltage. To perform the measurement, a null adjustment is made and the unknown voltage then is determined from a proportionality in which the unknown voltage is to the standard voltage as the ratio of the circuit resistances.

Figure 1 shows the basic circuit of the potentiometer. The principal adjustable component (main control) in this circuit is the slide wire, AC. This is a precision variable resistor which in its simplest form is a straight length of resistance wire stretched tautly between terminals A and C and provided with a slider and scale. In modern laboratory potentiometers, the slide wire is spirally-wound around a form, in order to get as long a strand as possible into a small space.

Battery B supplies a current to the slide wire through the adjustable limiting resistance, R. A standard cell supplying an accurate voltage, $E_s$, is connected to the slide wire through a center-zero d-c galvanometer, M.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Printed monthly by Aerovox Corporation, New Bedford, Mass., U. S. A.



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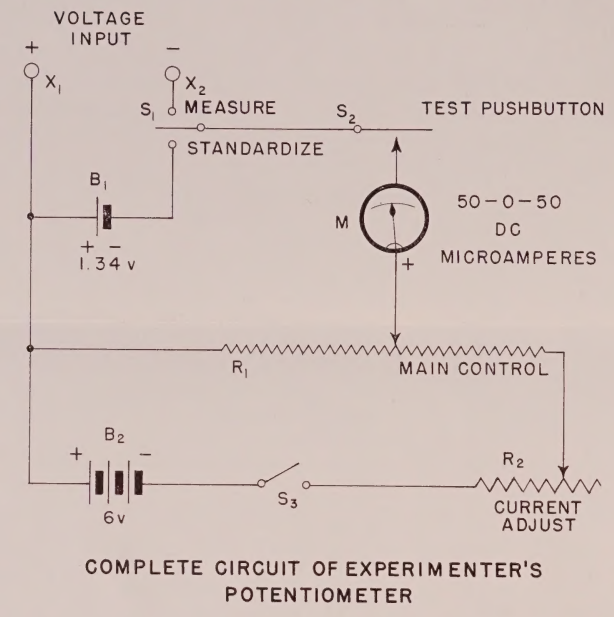
As the slider is moved along the wire, the resistance between A and B, and B and C, is changed. Thus, the ratio of resistance between A and B to that between B and C may be altered as minutely as the slider can be positioned. Current flowing from Battery B produces a voltage gradient along the wire, so that the voltage drop between A and B is directly proportional to the distance from A to B. Thus, the voltage drop is $e_1$ (corresponding to an A-to-B resistance of $r_1$) when the slider is at B, and is $e_2$ (corresponding to an A-to-B' resistance of $r_2$) when the slider is set to B'. The resistance and voltage drop increase between A and B and decrease between B and C as the slider is moved to the right. The opposite is true when the slider is moved to the left.

To illustrate operation of the circuit, assume first that the slider is set to Point B (say, midway between A and C) and that the rheostat, R, is adjusted to pass a safe amount of current through the slide wire. A voltage drop, $e_1$, will be set up between A and B. This voltage will increase as R is lowered, and vice versa, and its polarity will be the same as that of the standard cell. When $e_1$ equals the standard cell, voltage, $E_s$, it will buck the latter and no current will flow in the circuit AMB. Consequently, the galvanometer, M, will not be deflected. Thus, the meter may be zeroed initially by adjustment of Rheostat R. At this point, the circuit is nulled and the resistance setting of the slide wire is indicated by $r_1$.

Now, if the standard cell is removed from the circuit and an unknown voltage ($E_x$) substituted for it, the circuit can remain balanced (nulled) only if the unknown voltage is equal to the standard cell voltage; i. e., $E_x = E_s$. If this equality does not exist, the meter will be deflected upscale if $E_x$ is smaller than $E_s$, or downscale if $E_x$ is larger than $E_s$. To restore null, the slider must be moved to a new point (B') at which the voltage drop ($e_2$) equals the unknown voltage. Voltage $e_2$ then will buck $E_x$, and the meter will be returned to zero. The new resistance, between A and B', now is $r_2$. (The slider would be moved to the right to B', as shown, if the unknown voltage were higher than the standard cell voltage. It would be moved to the left if the unknown were lower). If the slide wire is accurately calibrated in resistance settings and the standard cell voltage is known closely, the unknown voltage ($E_x$) may be determined from the initial and final resistance settings ($r_1$ and $r_2$) and the standard cell voltage ($E_s$): Thus, $E_x = (E_s r_2)/r_1$. This is true because the ratio of the voltages is equal to the ratio of the resistance settings. That is, $E_x/E_s = r_2/r_1$.




COMPLETE CIRCUIT OF EXPERIMENTER'S POTENTIOMETER

FIG. 2

The precision of voltage measurement by this method depends upon the accuracy of setting of the slide wire, the accuracy to which the standard cell voltage is known, and the sensitivity of the galvanometer.

### Details of Experimental Instrument

In commercial, high-precision, laboratory potentiometers, the slide wire is replaced by a bank of precision resistors adjusted by rotary switches. The standard cell is of the special cadmium type and has a nominal voltage of 1.01830 v.

The experimenter's potentiometer (Figure 2) employs a 10-turn helical potentiometer, $R_1$, for the slide wire. This 1000-ohm unit has a linearity of 0.1%. It is provided with a direct-reading dial (supplied by its manufacturer). Since the resistance of this component is directly proportional to the shaft rotation, the dial reads direct in ohms. The standard cell ($B_1$) is an inexpensive mercury cell. The cell voltage remains constant at 1.34 v nominal throughout the cell life, almost to the exact instant of burnout. Before installation into the circuit, the exact voltage of this cell may be determined by means of separate precision voltage measurement.

The galvanometer is a standard 50-0-50 d-c microammeter, M. A normally-open pushbutton switch, $S_2$, is connected in series with this meter. Both the meter and the standard cell are protected, since current can flow in the meter circuit only during short intervals when the pushbutton is tapped for test. (The current drain could be considerable when the circuit is unbalanced, hence should not be allowed to flow continuously under off-null conditions).

The spdt switch, $S_1$, is the function switch. When it is thrown to its STANDARDIZE position, the standard cell, $B_1$, is connected to the potentiometer circuit for initial null adjustment. When $S_1$ is thrown to its MEASURE position, the standard cell is disconnected and an unknown voltage, applied to the input terminals, $X_1$ and $X_2$, may be measured with the potentiometer.

The 6-volt battery, $B_2$, supplies current to the slide wire potentiometer through the CURRENT ADJUST rheostat, $R_2$. A spst switch, $S_3$, is provided for disconnecting this battery when the instrument is not in use. Both $R_1$ and $R_2$ must be wirewound units. No graduated dial is needed for $R_2$.

The 10-turn potentiometer, $R_1$, has been specified for compactness, simplicity, accuracy, and convenience. However, in less critical versions of this instrument, a single-turn wirewound potentiometer may be employed if it is provided with an accurately-calibrated, direct-reading ohms dial.

### Operation of Instrument

**Initial Balance.** (1) Set Switch $S_1$ to STANDARDIZE. (2) Set Potentiometer $R_1$ to some convenient point near the center of its range. (3) Close Switch $S_3$. (4) Tap Pushbutton switch $S_2$ repeatedly while adjusting Rheostat $R_2$. Continue to do this until Meter M no longer deflects in either direction. To prevent damage to the meter, the button should not be held down continuously for any length of time, only tapped, until deflection of the meter no longer is beyond either full-scale limit. (5) The circuit is balanced (nulled) when the meter does not deflect either upscale or downscale when the pushbutton is depressed. (6) At this point, note the resistance setting of $R_1$ and record this value as $r_1$.

**Voltage Measurement.** After the balancing operation is completed according to the instructions given in the preceding paragraphs, proceed immediately with d-c voltage measurement in the following manner: (1) Do not disturb the setting of $R_2$, and keep $S_3$ closed. (2) Connect the source of unknown voltage to VOLTAGE INPUT terminals $X_1$ and $X_2$, carefully observing the correct polarity. (3) Throw Switch $S_1$ to its MEASURE position. (4) Tap Pushbutton $S_2$ repeatedly while adjusting Potentiometer $R_1$. (5) The null point is reached in the adjustment of $R_1$ when Meter M no longer is deflected when $S_2$ is closed. At this point, record the resistance setting of $R_1$ as $r_2$. (6) Calculate the unknown voltage ($E_x$) in terms of the 1.34 v standard cell ($B_1$) voltage: $E_x = (1.34r_2)/r_1$. (The resistance value $r_1$ was obtained from the potentiometer setting in the initial null adjustment). If it was determined by pre-installation measurements that the voltage of $B_1$ differs from the nominal 1.34-volt value, substitute the true value in the formula.

**Measurement of High Voltage.** When the unknown voltage is much higher than that of the standard cell, a null point will not be found at any setting of Potentiometer $R_1$. Such a voltage must be stepped down before it can be accommodated by the instrument.

The stepdown is provided by an external potentiometer termed a **volt box.** Figure 3(A) shows the basic arrangement of the volt box: A series a resistors are connected in a step-type potentiometer circuit to provide various voltage step-down ratios such as 1000:1, 100:1, 10:1, etc. Figure 3(B) shows the connections between voltage source, volt box, and potentiometer. The potentiometer is balanced for the unknown voltage in the usual manner. The unknown voltage ($E_x$) then is calculated: $E_x = (1.34mr_2)/r_1$, where **m** is the multiplication ratio of the volt box. (For example; if the volt box "steps the applied voltage down" to 1/300 of its original value, m = 300).

The experimenter may build his own volt box from a properly chosen set of precision fixed resistors selected for desired step-down ratios. Recommended ratios are 1000:1, 300:1, 100:1, 30:1, and 10:1. The use of a calibrated smooth-type potentiometer is to be discouraged, since the reset precision of this type may be poor.

### CAPTION FOR FIGURE 2

$B_1$—1.34 v mercury cell — Mallory RH3R

$B_2$—Midget 6-volt dry battery — Burgess 2F4

M—50-0-50 d-c microammeter — Triplett Model 327T

$R_1$—1000-ohm, 10-turn, helical potentiometer — Borg Model 205 with direct-reading dial — Borg Model 1307

$R_2$—7500-ohm, 3-watt, wirewound rheostat — I. R. C. Type 58

$S_1$—Spdt wafer switch — Centralab 1460

$S_2$—Spst, normally-open, pushbutton switch — Grayhill Series 4000

$S_3$—Spst toggle switch

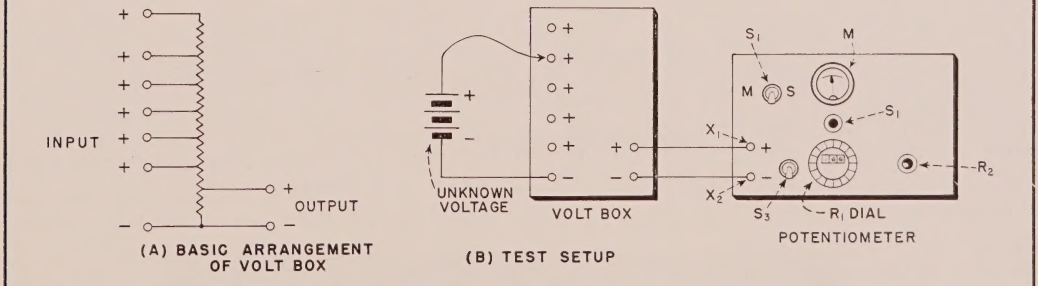
### ERRATA

November-December 1958 Research Worker, Volume 28, Numbers 11-12.

Equation (1) should read

$$\cos \ominus = \frac{E_a^2 + E_f^2 - E_c^2}{2E_aE_f}$$

The paragraph immediately above Equation (1) should begin: "If $E_a$ and $E_f$ are sinewaves of the same frequency, etc."

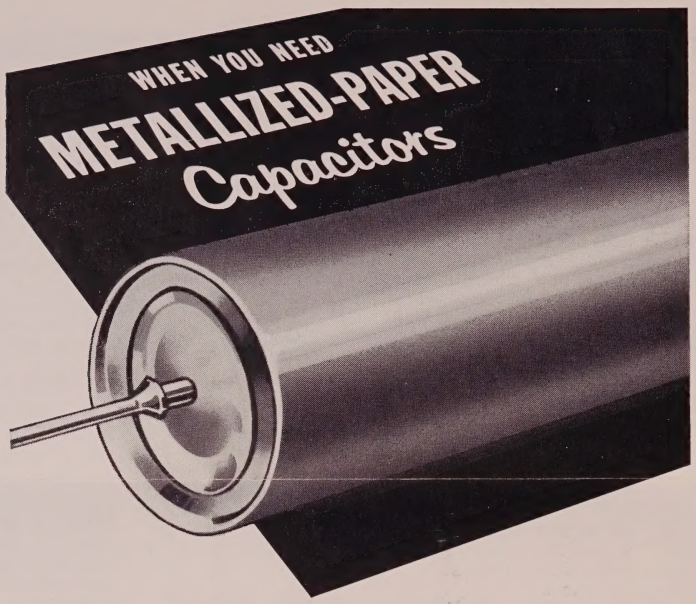



(A) BASIC ARRANGEMENT OF VOLT BOX

(B) TEST SETUP

USE OF VOLT BOX TO MEASURE HIGH VOLTAGE

FIG. 3

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